Boys in trouble at school: *I Am* stories to live in.

In this chapter I discuss how a community-based re-writing of young people's troublesome identity stories can make a significant difference to how they enact themselves at school. I also discuss how, for me as a narrative therapist, these practices which view identity as a social achievement are themselves one expression of a theology which sees people as made relationally in the image of a social God.

Two key perspectives

As a narrative therapist and teacher of 20 years working with young people in schools I come to this topic – boys in trouble at school – from two key perspectives. The first is to think of young people's actions (troubling or otherwise) as flowing from their identity stories. That is to say, I understand that a young person's stories about "who I am" guides their sense of "how I ought to act" in any given place and time (White, 2007, Epston & White, 1990). Further, people's identity stories are shaped by the identity stories available within their communities (Freedman & Combs, 1996). That is to say, young people and others do not simply make up their identity stories – they piece them together from the stories available and acceptable within their world of influence. In that sense you could say that young people enact their own versions of the identity stories made available to them within their communities (Shotter & Gergen, 1989).

The second perspective that shapes this topic for me is that different identity stories have different effects. Some identity stories focus on what young people care about, and what they might be trying to achieve in their sometimes misdirected actions. I call these *"I Am"* stories because they describe young people in terms of their hopes for life. However, some identity stories highlight misdirected steps taken. While often well intentioned, I call such identity stories *"I Am Not"* stories because they describe young people in terms of what they have done wrong. My experience of fifteen years as a school guidance counsellor is that young people most often prefer the I Am version of themselves, and the actions which flow from such identity stories are very likely to be less troubling for the young person and for those around them.

Introducing Jack

As an example, let me introduce Jack: Jack (a pseudonym) is a young man who has a reputation for trouble at school and at home. The I Am Not stories around Jack describe him as a continuous trouble maker at school, and non-cooperative and argumentative at home. The actions associated with these stories have Jack as a candidate for suspension from school, and have his mother bringing him to counselling in an effort to change things at home. In our counselling conversations, I listen as Jack tells me I Am Not stories about trouble at school and home. However, while providing Jack a safe relational space to speak about his experience, I am also listening carefully for echoes of I Am stories as he speaks. Amongst the stories of

trouble, I also hear that Jack has been watching other people in his class and noticing that they succeed at times when he does not – succeed in getting work done, in achieving grades, in avoiding too much conflict in class. I also hear that Jack notices the way conflict at home hurts his mother, and that he does not like that, and has, at times, taken steps to avoid hurting his mother in these ways. I also hear that Jack has some hopes for his future, and aims to succeed at school in order to get the job he is hoping for. As I listen, my aim is to explore with Jack these I Am accounts – stories of Jack as someone who notices how things could be different, and as someone who has hopes that things could be different for him and those he cares about. My hope is that, as we develop I Am accounts together, Jack's actions will begin to reflect that identity more closely.

After our second conversation I wrote Jack this letter:

Dear Jack,

Thanks for the chance to speak again today.

Throughout our conversations one thread keeps returning: That you are someone with hopes for both now and for the future.

You told me that since Year Seven you have been observing how others succeed in class and you have been thinking about your future. You described your hopes for yourself as we spoke – hopes that include:

- That in daily life you can concentrate on work leading to a successful career;

- That every time you are in school you are able to focus on what you need – you called that a work ethic;

- That you see the big picture – you called that important;

- That you get what people have been saying: not talking, listening, doing what you are told – these basics lead from A to B;

- That you learn to do it even if you like it or not;

- That you be able to set your priorities at school, and avoid doing what causes unnecessary frustration and anger at home;

- That you be more long-term oriented, mindful of your life goals;

- That you recognise what you need to improve yourself;

- That it is more about looking after your relationships than making a point in the short term.

When I asked you if you could do all that, you replied (without showing off), "Yes, I've got what it takes".

I see this life-project as really important. And also as something that can take as long as it takes. To my mind, this project is something for you to do, and also something for those who care for you to support you in doing. Am I right in thinking that your grandmother, your parents, and your brother are all keen to help with that? I wonder if any teachers might be keen next year too?

Again, thanks for the chance to talk – I enjoy that.

Warmly,

Donald / Dr Mac

For Jack, as for me, *I Am* identity stories such as those described in this letter co-exist alongside *I Am Not* identity stories. In my own experience it takes energy to choose to live in *I Am* stories; it seems that, unless I put deliberate effort into not doing so, I can readily default into available *I Am Not* identity stories. And this raises an important point for me as a counsellor: Given that I am interested in helping young people and others to develop and live into their *I Am* identity stories, what practices help to keep these more nourishing identity accounts available and influential in a person's life?

Thickening identity stories

In order to support nourishing identity accounts, and the first place, *I Am* identity stories need to be richly researched and developed so that they are as complete and available as possible. That is, helpers need to support young people to re-engage with their history (White, 2000) in order to identify what and who it is that they care about, and highlight the actions they have taken towards achieving what they care about. For Jack, his noticing of others, his hopes for himself, and the efforts he has taken towards his goals, are stories which can be highlighted and developed in order that they become available to shape Jack's actions at school and at home. Such stories, when fully told, can develop a sense of self in keeping with Jack's own hopes in life. And these hope-oriented stories, when told and re-told, can go on to shape Jack's future actions.

One metaphor I use for such preferred identity stories is that they are like planets in space: the more fully a preferred identity story is developed and enriched, the more gravity it has to attract and hold in orbit a young person's sense of self and their actions which flow from that sense of self. If we can develop them as fully as possible, Jack's I Am accounts may well make a difference to how he acts at home and at school.

To further develop their influence, *I Am* identity stories need to be told and re-told to and with the significant figures in a young person's life (White, 2000 a). The more that preferred identity stories are heard by, added to and supported by significant others, the more gravity they come to have – the more attractive and influential they become. In Jack's story, we discussed who might know, or not be surprised to hear, that he was hoping to make a difference in his life and relationships. Jack reported

that his grandmother, his parents and his older brother would all be interested in knowing and supporting his hopes. Jack and I discussed showing the letter above to these key people in order to recruit their support for his efforts.

Audience

Let me say a little more about audiences here: As a narrative therapist I hold that identity stories are a social construction, a social achievement (Gergen, 2001; Shotter & Gergen, 1989, White & Epston, 1990). I'm thinking of two points here. Firstly the idea that the stories that young people are taken up into, through which they make sense of themselves and others, and which shape their actions, these stories are pieced together from the ways of speaking that are available and influential within their communities (Burr, 2003). If a young person is interested in making sense of themselves differently, they will still draw on the available storied resources from within their world of influence. One implication of this is that working with young people to explore alternative and preferred identity stories must, wherever possible, include working with their support communities to clarify and thicken preferred identity stories – including what it is that the community values and is working for. This approach leads to working with a young person both as an individual and as a community member - the social construction of identity. In this light it is important that counsellors and support communities help make alternative ways of making sense of life available to young people.

Secondly, and equally importantly, preferred identity stories cannot thrive without the support of these significant community-others. If a counsellor works with a young person to develop preferred identity stories, and their peers, teachers and family continue to relate to them in terms of their previous identity stories (or reputations as they are sometimes called), the new possibilities, however desirable, are unlikely to thrive. Therefore it is important that significant figures in the young person's life be invited to hear, add to and support new and preferred identity claims through times of telling and re-telling of preferred stories (White, 2000 b). An example of this can be imagined where Jack shows his grandmother, parents and brother the letter above; their responses will play a large part in the new story's influence. The more they agree with and support the version of Jack described in the letter, the more it is likely to influence his future actions.

A Relational God

Although I come to these practices through training as a narrative therapist, one attraction of these ideas for me is their resonance with my faith stance. When narrative therapy speaks of identity as a relational achievement, the key relationship I have in mind is that with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a community of persons so lovingly relational that Christians speak of them as One, as God. In this light, to be the Person, Father, is to be forever in relationship with the Person, Son – that is, individual personhood exists in relationship (Balswick, King & Reimer, 2005). And if, as I believe, we are made in the image of this relational God, our personhood is also something which arises out of relationship – initially and eternally with God, and then, modelled on Father, Son and Spirit's love relationships, with those around

us (Ware, 2010). Therefore, as Zizioulas (1991) suggests, if to be a person is to be in relationship, it follows that helpful identity practices must pay attention to the relationships within which personhood exists. It is here that I find the language of social construction of identity helpful (Burr, 2003).

Additionally, narrative therapy holds that people know themselves through the stories they tell about themselves, and the stories that others tell about them. What I highlight here is that such identity stories are fundamentally relational – the language from which identity stories are made is the socially available language of particular times and places. The values that shape which identity stories are highlighted and which are not highlighted are the values of particular relationships in time and place. The acceptance or otherwise of a person's storied identity claims depends on what is valued within the relationships between the persons involved. Thus relationship shapes the vocabulary, the selection of content and the on-going value of people's identity stories (Gergen, 1999; 2001). Here I am saying that the project for narrative therapists is to help young people and their communities to research and develop the vocabularies, stories, relationships, and audiences which highlight the *I Am* stories of a person's life and identity.

When Father, Son and Holy Spirit select words to describe each other and their relationships, scripture reports things like: "You are My Son, My Beloved! In You I am well pleased and find delight!" (Luke 3:22, Amplified Version) and, "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21, New International Version). In ways like these the three Persons of God can be said to speak each other's identities into being - through words of love and actions of inclusion as Volf (1996) puts it. In choosing to speak languages of love and inclusion, each person offers and is offered a life-giving place to belong within – as Father, as Son, as beloved Spirit. Similarly, the language and the stories we choose to speak to and about ourselves and others shape who we and they can be. If, as I believe, people are made in the image of God through participation in God's life of love, then God intends people to know themselves as beloved, and to offer beloved-ness to others. We are made to know ourselves and each other within such *I Am* stories.

The question then is, what practices help to keep such nourishing, relational identity stories available and influential in a young person's life? As I wrote above, in order to reflect that Image in which they are made, young people's *I Am* identity stories need to be richly researched and developed so that they are as complete and available as possible, and these *I Am* identity stories need to be told and re-told to and with the significant figures in a young person's life.

Possibilities for re-authoring I-Am stories at school

When applied in the context of young people in trouble at school, a practice of community re-authoring of a young person's *I Am* identity stories includes several elements which overlap and repeat as required. Broadly speaking, the school guidance counsellor (or similar) initially offers an invitation to explore alternative and preferred stories of identity to a young person whose actions have them in trouble. At best this offer is invitational: Just as being God's beloved is a gentle invitation,

deciding to explore alternative identity stories is something young people are invited to. While in a school context this invitation is often backed by unattractive alternatives such as stand-downs or suspensions, as much as possible it is important that participation is something the young person opts for themselves. Thus the initial relationship within which an identity story re-authoring project takes place is characterised by collaboration.

If that invitation to re-story identity is accepted, and when the time is right to do so, together with appropriate others the young person can participate in a process of restorative responses for any harm which may have been done by their actions (Drewery, Winslade & McMenamin, 2002; Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2014). Often young people in trouble have caused harm to others or to things. Attending to the righting of relationships and repairing of harm done clears the way for stepping into new identity stories. Restorative responses involve gathering the connected parties and discussing what happened, what effects that may have had on all concerned, and what could be done to help make things right (Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2008, Winslade & Williams, 2012). My experience is that when young people hear and understand of the effects of their actions in a no-blame, restorative conversation, and when others see that a young person understands the effects of their actions, something akin to grace often appears and unexpected ways forward can emerge. Where, as much as possible, harm to relationship and things have been attended to, a project of re-authoring of identity stories can continue. I say continue, because taking up an invitation to join the project and participating in a restorative process are themselves powerful demonstrations of new and preferred identity claims.

Next the young person and the school guidance counsellor begin to develop alternative descriptions of the young person through exploring what their actions say about what they care for (Carey, Walther & Russell, 2009; Wade, 2005). As alternative identity stories develop, these are enriched and further developed together with chosen support people including peers, teachers, family and community members (White, 1995). There are two main threads to the initial re-storying of identity. Firstly, the actions taken by a young person, however unacceptable, can be understood as misguided attempts to achieve something good (Jenkins, 2009). Exploring young people's actions with an eye for any ethical intentions implicit within their actions can help clarify what it is that the young person values in life. These values often have a history to be explored, and a future to be wondered about (Epston & Roth, 1995; White, 2000).

Secondly, the young person themselves, or others close to them, may know of times and places where their actions tell a different story to the troubled one (Denborough, 2014). As above, within these other action stories are hints of the values which shape the young person's hopes for themselves and others. These values also have a history to be explored, and a future to be wondered about.

By gathering up accounts of times and places where the young person has acted on behalf of preferred hopes and values, it is possible to develop quite substantial

identity stories which contradict and can replace prevailing problem-saturated accounts.

Throughout this process of re-authoring identity stories opportunities for telling and re-telling new stories of identity are explored together with chosen support people. As above, the more emerging stories are told and re-told, the more it becomes possible for people to step into those identity claims, and act accordingly (White, n.d.). Telling and re-telling preferred identity stories is achieved in many ways. Some examples include sending letters such as the letter above, and other documents which highlight preferred identity accounts (Newman, 2008; Speedy, 2005). Letters and documents can be sent to the young person and to those they nominate. Telling and retelling can also be achieved through gathering peers, teachers, family and community members in groups small and large (outsider witnessing, definitional ceremonies) (White, 2000 a, 2000 b) to hear and affirm alternative identity claims. Such times of telling and re-telling allow supporters to say in effect, I hear what you are now saying about yourself, and I agree with and support that.

As emphasised above, *I Am* stories often co-exist alongside *I Am Not* stories. Stepping into preferred *I Am* stories does not necessarily remove *I Am Not* stories, nor do all relationships in a young person's life necessarily support preferred alternative identity stories. For these reasons it is important that the community of care remain vigilant in their support for a young person's preferred identity accounts and continue to promote actions in keeping with these. How that support looks will vary according to the community involved, but on-going support is important. Often that support can take the form of working together to make a difference for others – for example becoming involved in anti-bullying groups, or finding ways to tell their stories to younger people as a support for others' preferred identity stories and so on (Denborough, 2008). In this way, taking action to help others can be yet another site for the demonstration of, the telling and retelling of, new identity stories.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described how, for me, a narrative therapy project of re-authoring identity stories for young people within community resonates with the invitation Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally offer: "You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased". Through focusing on the *I Am* actions and stories of young people's lives it is possible to highlight people's hopes and the actions and relationships which support those hopes. In this work I see counsellors and community members cooperating with God's project, "who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18, New International Version).

References

Balswick, J., King, P., & Reimer, K. (2005). *The reciprocating self: Human development in theological perspective*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism*. London, England: Routledge.

Carey, M., Walther, S., & Russell, S. (2009). The absent but implicit: A map to support therapeutic enquiry. *Family Process, 48*, 319–331.

Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice: Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the stories of our lives: Everyday narrative therapy to draw inspiration and transform experience*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Drewery, W., Winslade, J., & McMenamin, D. (2002). *Restorative Practices for Schools.* Hamilton, NZ: Waikato University Publications.

Epston, D. & Roth, S. (1995). *Engaging young persons in externalizing conversations: Developing abilities and knowledge*. New York, NY: Norton.

Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York, NY: Norton.

Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Gergen, K. J. (2001). *Social construction in context*. London, England: Sage Publications.

Jenkins, A. (2009). *Becoming ethical: A parallel, political journey with men who have abused*. Dorset, England: Russell House Publishing.

Newman, D. (2008). Rescuing the said from the saying of it: Living documentation in narrative therapy. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 3*, 24–34.

Shotter, J., & Gergen, K. J. (1989). *Texts of identity*. London, England: Sage Publications.

Speedy, J. (2005). Using poetic documents: An exploration of poststructuralist ideas and poetic practices in narrative therapy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 33(3)*, 283–298.

Thorsborne, M., & Vinegrad, D. (2014). *Restorative Justice Pocketbook*. New York: Management Pocketbooks.

Volf, M. (1996). *Exclusion and embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Wade, A. (2005). *Honouring resistance: A response-based approach to counselling*. Vancouver, B.C.: Stepping Stone Productions.

Ware, M. K. (2010). The holy trinity: Model for personhood-in-relation. In J. Polkinghorne (Ed.),   *The trinity and an entangled world: Relationality in physical science and theology* (pp. 107-129). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

White, M. (n.d.). *Workshop notes.* Retrieved from www.dulwichcentre.com.au/michael-white-workshop-notes.pdf

White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: Interviews and essays*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2000). Re-engaging with history: The absent but implicit. In *Reflections on narrative practice: Essays and interviews* (pp. 35–58). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2000 a). Challenging the culture of consumption: Rites of passage and communities of acknowledgement. In *Reflections on narrative practice: Essays and interviews* (pp 25-33). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2000 b). Reflecting team work as definitional ceremony revisited. In *Reflections on narrative practice: Essays and interviews* (pp. 59–88). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice.* New York, NY: Norton.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York, NY: Norton.

Winslade, J., & Williams, M. (2012). *Safe and peaceful schools: Addressing conflict and eliminating violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Zizioulas, J. (1991). On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood. In C. Schwöbel & C. E. Gunton (Eds.), *Persons, Divine, and Human : King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

References

Zizioulas, J. (1991). On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood. In C. Schwöbel & C. E. Gunton (Eds.), *Persons, Divine, and Human : King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.